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Military Lessons from Desert One to the Balkans

by Ike Skelton

Key Points

The performance of the Armed Forces has shown a marked improvement since its low point in the post-Vietnam era. Military leaders have deliberately sought out and internalized lessons from each succeeding conflict. The challenge for the next generation is learning the lessons of these past operations and building an even more effective, flexible force.

The military cannot pick and choose its missions. Their political masters may well decide that national interests require the use of force for more nontraditional missions or in situations that may be less than ideally suited to military solutions.

Force protection is critical; high rates of casualties can erode popular support and undermine the mission. On the other hand, excessive fear of casualties can erode the morale of the Armed Forces. The key is forging American leadership that understands the military risks involved.

Commitments to our allies may draw us into conflicts where U.S. national interests are limited, but where American leadership is essential to the vitality of the alliance.

Even a small operation conducted abroad requires an extraordinary range of well-trained forces, either highly deployable or already in theater.

Despite successes, the Armed Forces must address a number of challenges: urban warfare, weapons of mass destruction, tracking and destroying mobile targets, the need for lighter, more deployable forces, and the burden of ongoing operations.

Military leaders are often accused, usually unfairly, of fighting the last war. It would be a pretty poor general, however, who failed to learn from what worked and what didn't work when military plans were actually put to the test. The task is to correct what went wrong and to build on what went right without losing sight of the fact that conflicts in the future may be quite different from those in the past. It is the premise of this article that a careful look at significant U.S. military operations over about the past twenty years—roughly the period the author has served in Congress—can help shape answers to a surprisingly large number of contemporary issues in defense policy. What follows is a brief review of seven of these military operations, followed by a discussion of some important lessons.

Iran (1980)

President Carter authorized an audacious military operation in April 1980 to rescue American diplomats held hostage in Tehran since the previous November. Although the operation ended in disaster in the Iranian desert at a site in Iran code-named *Desert One*, it ultimately had important consequences. It prompted a great deal of public soul-searching about the state of U.S. military readiness and, perhaps most importantly, it marked a turning point in popular support for military preparedness. The lessons of *Desert One* also contributed to steps that Congress took in coming years to strengthen special operations forces and clarify lines of command.

Lebanon (1982–1984)

U.S. Marines were sent to Lebanon in September 1982 as part of a multinational force (MNF) in response to a worsening civil war. The failure of the MNF mission, and the tragic loss of 241 Marines when a truck bomb was exploded at Marine headquarters in Beirut, imposed sobering lessons on U.S. policymakers. The mission was ill-defined from the beginning. It was not clear whether the MNF was a traditional *peacekeeping* force depending for its effectiveness on maintaining the consent of contending parties, or whether it was a *peace-making* force empowered to compel adherence to agreements more assertively. The rules of engagement governing the conduct of troops in the field were ambiguous, and actions necessary to protect the force were not taken. As the security situation deteriorated, it should have become apparent that the size and composition of the force were inadequate, but decisionmakers failed to rethink the nature of the mission and instead allowed U.S. involvement to escalate incrementally.

The outcome of that mission shaped subsequent U.S. debates about the use of military force. Lebanon was clearly at the forefront of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's thinking when, in November 1984, he articulated what came to be known as the "Weinberger Doctrine," laying out six restrictive conditions on U.S. military action. Weinberger's sharpest critic was Secretary of State George Shultz, who in a series of three speeches took issue with most of those conditions. Echoes of their exchange are heard frequently in debates over military operations.

Grenada (1983)

Operation *Urgent Fury* in Grenada was planned with virtually no advance warning and executed by diverse units with no opportunity to train jointly before the operation began. Though it succeeded, it was not a walkover. The operation suffered from shortcomings that cost lives. Intelligence was incomplete, and communications were often unreliable, particularly in coordinating air attacks and naval gunfire with ground operations.

Perhaps the most important lesson of Grenada is the value of bold, concerted, aggressive military action, even in the face of incomplete intelligence and in spite of the certainty that some things will go wrong. In this operation, aggressiveness contributed to a viable overall strategic plan, which enabled American forces to perform very well in a very demanding operation.

Panama (1989–1990)

Despite some negatives, the main lessons of this operation against the Panamanian Defense Force and General Manuel Noriega were overwhelmingly positive. The cohesiveness of Operation *Just Cause* demonstrated the effectiveness of joint planning and command structures instituted following enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Simultaneous, coordinated assaults, using forces from each of the services, multiplied the impact of the whole operation. The action achieved a large measure of tactical surprise. The fact that the initial, critical stages of the intervention were carried out at night was particularly significant. As one commander noted, “We owned the night.” Unmatched night-fighting capabilities have constituted a major U.S. tactical advantage ever since. Panama was clearly a case in which adequate force was applied to accomplish well-defined objectives with minimal casualties.

Persian Gulf (1990–1991)

The Persian Gulf War demonstrated the remarkable reconstitution of U.S. military power in the 15 years following an institutionally devastating failure in Vietnam. In all, 541,000 U.S. military personnel were committed to Operation *Desert Storm*, along with some 200,000 allied forces. Not surprisingly, given the size, complexity, and importance of

the conflict, the effort to draw appropriate lessons has been extensive, and it continues to this day.

The most obvious conclusion is that no nation today can directly challenge U.S. conventional military strength, and it would be folly to try—a lesson our potential foes are certain also to have learned. Beyond that, the

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conflict demonstrated the efficacy of precision munitions; the success of stealth technology; the critical importance of air supremacy; the advantages of night operations; the ability of air power, under the right conditions, to disable an enemy command and control infrastructure; the immense importance of sound military doctrine and operational tenets derived from a careful study of past conflicts; the critical importance of unified command; the advantages of a well-trained professional military force; the value of attack helicopters, close support aircraft, and a number of other platforms when used creatively and with a full understanding of their potential vulnerabilities; the critical importance of information dominance; and the absolute necessity of good diplomacy in managing relations with allies and in deflecting serious outside challenges to the cohesiveness of a broad coalition. On all these diverse matters, the critical lesson is to keep doing what we have been doing.

There are some other, more cautionary lessons to be learned, however. The vulnerability of U.S. forces—and of critical allies—to weapons of mass destruction was a matter of grave concern. In the end, deterrence seems to have worked, but we need to consider whether it might fail in different circumstances. An immense effort was devoted to hunting down mobile missile launchers, but with no success at all. *Desert Storm* showed that much work

remained to be done to provide critical intelligence immediately and directly to the forces that need it. While command and control arrangements worked very well by previous standards, air tasking orders had to be put on paper and flown out to aircraft carriers every day—not the way, in the information age, to carry out a complex, multidimensional campaign.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, before Operation *Desert Storm* began, the United States and its allies had almost 5 months to build up military forces in the region. No enemy in the future is likely to allow us such a luxury.

Bosnia (1992–)

In June 1992, elements of the United Nations Protection Force were deployed to Bosnia to help restrain a growing civil war. As the civil war worsened, and the situation deteriorated further, the United States had a very difficult time deciding how much involvement U.S. interests warranted. Lack of American leadership risked weakening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Until the last half of 1995, half-hearted NATO efforts at coercive diplomacy, including the use of “pin-prick” air strikes, accomplished almost nothing.

A more extensive application of air power in Operation *Deliberate Force*, in contrast, was highly successful. Coupled with a Bosnian government ground offensive, it succeeded in forcing the Bosnian Serbs to make critical territorial concessions at the negotiating table. With U.S. leadership, NATO finally managed to forge a peace agreement and salvage its shaken credibility. The ongoing peace operation in Bosnia has also been largely successful. Assurances that U.S. troops would be withdrawn within a year were not realistic, however, and the operation now appears open-ended. Cuts in the size of the peacekeeping force and extensive use of reserves in Bosnia have had some effect in ameliorating the burden. But Bosnia—and now Kosovo—remain costly commitments.

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Kosovo (1998–)

With Yugoslav government violence against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo mounting, on March 24, 1998, NATO began air strikes against targets in Serbia and Kosovo. President Clinton said that the objectives of Operation *Allied Force* were to demonstrate NATO seriousness of purpose, to deter an even bloodier offensive by Yugoslavia against innocent civilians in Kosovo, and, if necessary, to seriously damage the Serbian military capacity to make war in Kosovo. Instead of capitulating, however, Yugoslav forces intensified their operations in a massive ethnic cleansing campaign to drive ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo.

In response, NATO progressively escalated the pace of its air attacks and extended its target set. Target selection initially focused on airfields, air defense, and military communications. Attacks subsequently were expanded to military barracks and military equipment production facilities in Serbia, logistical support facilities and lines of supply throughout Yugoslavia. Yugoslav forces in Kosovo, electrical transmission facilities, and television and other media outlets. Toward the end of the campaign, there appears to have been an effort to attack economic targets of particular value to Serbian leaders. Finally, on June 4, the Yugoslav government announced that it would accept a peace plan that called for an immediate cease-fire, withdrawal of all Yugoslav military and other security forces from Kosovo, deployment of an international peacekeeping force, and steps toward self-governance for Kosovo. On June 10, with evidence that Yugoslav forces were withdrawing, bombing ceased.

From the beginning of the campaign, the military logic of Operation *Allied Force* was a matter of intense, even bitter debate. In short, at least in its inception, the Kosovo air campaign was an exercise in coercive diplomacy rather than a concerted effort to prevail through military action by destroying the enemy capacity to wage war. And to the extent it became a warfighting exercise, it was much more a war of attrition than a modern U.S.-style application of decisive force. In this case, though, all of the attrition was on the other side. From the NATO point of view, this seems to have been enough, since Milosevic ultimately relented. It was not, however, enough to protect the Kosovars from the depredations of Yugoslav security forces.

The Current Debate

The value of reading and rereading history is not that old truths bear repeating, but that historical understanding is always new. Real events are always multifaceted and complex, and our perspectives on them always change when we view them through the prism of more recent experience. Looking back on these operations today turns out to be quite informative in discussing a number of contemporary issues. While others may distill different lessons from this brief review of recent military

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operations, here are a few perspectives that seem particularly relevant to current concerns.

Use of Force Debate over whether and under what conditions to undertake military action is nothing new. Ongoing debates over the use of force have stirred in every administration and will likely have to be addressed anew by every future government. Those who take absolute positions—especially in disputes along partisan lines—are likely to have to swallow their arguments later. In debates about Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, some have taken the Weinberger Doctrine almost as gospel. According to that doctrine, U.S. forces should be committed only when vital U.S. interests are at stake, when the mission is clear, when force fully and demonstrably adequate to accomplish the mission can be applied, and when public support is assured.

But that argument was vigorously disputed within the Reagan administration, particularly by then-Secretary of State George Shultz, from the moment it was articulated. Moreover, the Weinberger Doctrine clearly did not prevail in later decisions on the use of force, even when Weinberger still led the Department of Defense.

For military commanders, the lesson is that they cannot pick and choose what missions to prepare for. Political leaders may well decide that national security interests require the use of force even in circumstances that give military planners fits, or that detract from other priorities, or that may cost lots of money at a time when funding is tight, or that risk

unpredictable, bad consequences. This is not to say that commanders should simply salute and say “can do” when given any job. Political decisionmakers, too, should have learned that missions should be defined as clearly as possible. Adequate force should be applied. Force protection must be a high priority. Military commanders should properly point up all these lessons, but they cannot expect political leaders to agree, as one commentator would have it, that “superpowers don’t do windows.”

Fear of Casualties There has been a vigorous discussion recently about the effects a fear of casualties may have on the ethos of U.S. military forces. Looking back a few years—beyond Kosovo and Bosnia—confirms that this is a very serious issue. Aggressiveness of American military commanders has often been critical to the success of the operations. Anything that might erode the elan of U.S. fighting forces, therefore, ought to be troubling. It is also true, however, that force protection is critically important. It was lacking in Lebanon, with disastrous effects. And aggressiveness cannot be disconnected from a viable strategy for prevailing.

It is tempting to draw an obvious conclusion: if a mission is not sufficiently important to U.S. national interests to warrant risking casualties, then it may not be worth doing at all, because casualties may erode popular support and cause the operation to fail anyway. But this is a bit too simple. Political leaders cannot avoid deciding on military action when public support is uncertain. Choosing a course of action that minimizes the risk of casualties even at a cost to military effectiveness may not always be unrealistic or unreasonable. The critical task is to accept risks when necessary and to avoid them when unnecessary, and to imbue U.S. military leaders, from the top of the chain of command to the bottom, with the wisdom to know the difference.

Relations with Allies Relations with allies are never easy. Allies often perceive interests differently. And even when their interests and ours appear to coincide closely, history, domestic politics, varying military capabilities, and personal relationships among national leaders will affect the prospects for cooperation. One lesson of recent military operations is clear—the United States must be militarily and diplomatically flexible enough to cooperate with allies as much as possible, but also to

act with limited allied support when necessary. As Winston Churchill put it so well: "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies—and that is fighting without them."

Operations in Bosnia and Kosovo raise complex and controversial issues. One view is that the United States should not have become involved in either place, because U.S. interests were not sufficiently at stake to justify the costs and risks of military action. But as Bosnia shows, when major allies have decided to act, and the United States agrees with the goals of their action, it is very difficult for the United States to wash its hands of responsibility. Clearly the Bush administration did not want to get involved in leading a military campaign in Bosnia, and the Clinton administration tried to avoid it for another two-and-a-half years. Having offered support to the allies in the first place, however, it became too difficult, perhaps even impossible, to allow the cause to fail. Ultimately, American leadership proved necessary. The lesson is that commitments to allies can draw the United States into conflicts where direct U.S. interests are limited, but where our interest in the continued vitality of the alliance may require American leadership. But it is hardly a startling notion that alliances have costs as well as benefits.

Across-the-Board Strength Even apparently limited military operations have required a very broad range of well-trained and well-equipped forces. The interception of the *Achille Lauro* hijackers, a minor exercise of force not discussed in this paper, was conceivable only because the United States had in place an extraordinarily varied number of critical elements: a highly effective global intelligence capability, including human intelligence and high-technology means of collection; air combat forces that could be deployed rapidly and flexibly; other air assets, including electronic warfare aircraft, already in place in the region to monitor sudden and unexpected developments; sophisticated radar, able to pick out aircraft rapidly in high air traffic already in place in the region; special operations forces that could be deployed on immediate notice and transport aircraft able to carry them 6,000 miles across the Atlantic; a global communications network that allowed planners in Washington immediate access to intelligence and unbroken links to forces in the region; a history of engagement with many nations in the area that allowed timely contact with key decisionmakers; and well-trained, well-moti-

vated personnel in every one of these critical operational areas. All of this is expensive—the nation cannot expect to have global reach on the cheap.

Things to Work On While the United States has achieved a remarkable string of military successes in recent years, a review of past operations also shows some vulnerabilities. To their credit, the military services have recognized and have worked to correct a great many of them. Urban warfare is an obvious problem. Weapons of mass destruction may pose a disabling challenge to U.S. power projection capabilities, as the conflict with Iraq shows. We need

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a much deeper discussion of ways to ensure deterrence. Tracking down and destroying mobile targets remains an unresolved, serious problem. Though it may have been politically impossible to mount a ground operation in Kosovo that could have forestalled ethnic cleansing, it is critically important, nonetheless, to consider how a preemptive operation might have been mounted. The Army deserves credit for its current focus on building more deployable forces. Still, much remains to be resolved in determining precisely how lighter ground forces can accomplish critical missions.

An important unresolved issue is how to ameliorate the burden of ongoing operations, such as those in the Persian Gulf, in Bosnia, and now in Kosovo. Measures adopted to ease the burden have not gone far enough. Clearly there needs to be a discussion of more radical changes, including at least the strengthening of nonmilitary multinational institutions

to take on the chore of nation-building and even the establishment of an international constabulary force for ongoing peacekeeping missions. Such steps have not been popular in Congress, but these or other measures need to be reconsidered.

We've Done a Lot Right Perhaps the most important lesson is simply that the U.S. military has done a lot right. One can see in the conflicts reviewed here a progressive, substantial, lasting improvement in key capabilities, reflecting the willingness of the U.S. military to seek out and absorb the lessons of each new operation. The few years between Grenada and Panama, for example, witnessed improvements in command arrangements, operational planning, tactics and doctrine, training, and key technologies such as night vision equipment. The years between the Persian Gulf War and the Bosnia and Kosovo air campaigns showed the maturation of precision strike capabilities. The Army and the Air Force have both learned the need to be more readily deployable in an unpredictable global environment, and both are reorganizing substantially to become more flexible.

Congress, too, has sometimes helped. It established an independent Special Operations Command in 1987, an action that has been vindicated by the continued critical importance of special operations forces in a host of military actions since then, and by the marvelous performance of those forces when called upon. Congressional passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 clearly helped to clarify and strengthen command arrangements.

The main praise for building an increasingly flexible and effective force, however, must go to the military officers who rebuilt U.S. military capabilities after the Vietnam War. This generation has now almost entirely reached retirement age. The task of the next generation of military leaders is to learn as well as its predecessors learned from past conflicts.

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